

# **Valdur Mikita and the return of the real: In search of any-spaces-whatever in Estonian forests**

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**Abstract.** Around the turn of the millennium, a paradigm shift took place in Western arts and humanities. (Post)structuralism, which had focused on language, the signifier, the epistemological, receded, and both academic and artistic attention turned to the real, the material, the ontological, the object, or the so-called “thing-in-itself”. In Estonia, discussions of this shift started as recently as in the 2010s, and then mostly in the context of art and ethnology; however, in retrospect, changes in this direction can be observed earlier and also in other areas of life. The work of the author Valdur Mikita, who had started to write in the 1990s and became extremely popular in Estonia in 2013, is a characteristic example of this paradigm shift. The shift from language games to the real is illustrated by Mikita’s interest in what Gilles Deleuze has called ‘any-spaces-whatever’.

**Keywords:** Valdur Mikita; Gilles Deleuze; any-space-whatever; material turn; Estonian avant-garde

## **Introduction**

From the second half of the 1980s until the end of 1990s, Estonia underwent revolutionary changes: the country regained independence in 1991, took a sharp turn away from Russia and oriented itself politically, socially and culturally towards the West. This time has been called ‘the transition period’.<sup>2</sup> The transition period in arts and humanities emphasized experimentation, innovation of form, and the avant-garde, while the experimental artistic creation of the time, as well as contemporary art as a whole, were intimately connected to poststructuralist theories (Tomberg 2025). In the 1990s, Western Europe and the United States saw the influence of these theories wane and at the turn of the millennium a paradigm shift took place in the social and human sciences, which has been termed

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<sup>2</sup> For an overview of this period in Estonian arts and humanities, see Sarapik, Lopp 2025.

‘the material turn.’ In Estonia, however, poststructuralist theories continued to exert their influence on contemporary art and experimental literature well into the 2000s. Mentions of the material turn appeared only in the 2010s, for example in, and in connection with, art and ethnology, while the concept has gained little currency in the study of Estonian literature.

The material turn is a useful concept for analysis of several phenomena in Estonian literature that have remained relatively obscure until today – for example, the unusual career of Valdur Mikita (b. 1970). Mikita defended his PhD thesis entitled *Kreatiivsuskäsitluste võrdlus semiootikas ja psühholoogias* (*A Comparison between Creativity Treatments in Semiotics and Psychology*) at the University of Tartu’s Department of Semiotics in 2000.<sup>3</sup> To a considerable degree, his dissertation drew on the Tartu-Moscow School of Semiotics and its theories. Mikita’s first book, *Äparduse rõõm: Keele- ja kultuurimänge* (“The joy of mishap: A few language and culture games”), was published in 2000 as well. The book was largely based on his doctoral thesis; at the same time, however, it includes texts that can be classified as avant-garde poetry. Although Mikita’s early work was not met with immediate success among the wider reading public, it was quite enthusiastically received in some artistic and literary circles and among critics who approached it from the perspectives of structuralism and poststructuralism. Yet approximately a dozen years later, when Mikita published his essayistic work *Lingvistiline mets* (“The linguistic forest”, 2013), rather surprisingly something quite different happened: the book became extremely popular and sold in phenomenal numbers, yet scholars received it with hesitation and even tended to ignore it. In this work, Mikita speculated daringly on the themes of Estonian history and identity (which found a fertile soil even among the New Right that started to emerge at the time). In principle, national myth-creation should have great potential as a research object for social sciences and humanities. What, then, was the problem? Mikita mixed his myth-creation with all sorts of outrageous topics – synaesthetic perception, strange corporeal and sensory childhood experiences, speaking with natural objects, inventing new languages and forms of writing, etc. – that tended to evade the traditional toolboxes used in studying national identities. Some critics continued to consider *The Linguistic Forest* from a semiotic standpoint, but compared to the reception of *The Joy of Mishap* this perspective remained in the background. In short, academic reception did not quite know what to make of *The Linguistic Forest*, which is why this hugely popular phenomenon still remains largely uninterpreted even today.

<sup>3</sup> For an English-language article based on the material of the thesis, see Mikita 1999.

This article proposes a model for analysing *The Linguistic Forest* and Valdur Mikita's other works from the 2010s. The model does not refer to national myth-creation to explain the influence of Mikita's work; instead, it invokes global factors that nevertheless potentially operate and function together with national mythology. To use a concept proposed by Gilles Deleuze, a philosopher important for the material turn, several experiences and practices presented in Mikita's book *Wild Linguistics* (2008) and later works are concerned with finding and creating *any-spaces-whatever* (*espaces quelconques*). I will attempt to show that these practices characterize experimental creation that has undergone the material turn, that is, experimentation *after* the turn away from the signifier and towards materiality. Mikita is an example of how such a revolutionary passage need not necessarily entail any irreconcilable confrontations, but can instead take place smoothly and even naturally – at least in retrospect. Paradoxically, Mikita's plunge into the real is an organic continuation of the deconstructivist infinite displacement and annulment of meaning – or the end of this displacement. The popularity and commercial success of *The Linguistic Forest* may not so much indicate that people need a new national identity, but rather that they need to resist what Byung-Chul Han (2015) has called the transparency society – intensifying standardization, predictability, mechanization in society and in everyday life.

### **Estonian poststructuralist avant-garde and Valdur Mikita**

Modernism, including avant-gardism, was not particularly influential or popular in Estonia before the transition period and regaining of independence. Although modernism had become the dominant cultural paradigm in Europe already at the beginning of the 20th century, this was not the case in Estonia. Estonian literary scholar Tiit Hennoste (2003: 45) has claimed: "Similarly to Europe, Estonian literature's central paradigm, ideals, and the direction of its mainstream were set in place at the beginning of the century. This mainstream, which was largely determined by Young Estonia,<sup>4</sup> has been trodden for almost a century. It consists of neoromanticism, psychological realism – and not 20th-century modernism in the European sense." A decade later, art historian and critic Sirje Helme (2013: 19) added to Hennoste's claim: "This evaluation is valid also for visual culture". There was modernism in Estonian literature, but it was characterized by certain refusal

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<sup>4</sup> Young Estonia was an influential literary movement in Estonia at the start of the 20th century. To a great degree it determined the ways in which contemporary Estonian culture was being renewed; particularly well known was – and still is – their slogan "Let us remain Estonians, but let us become Europeans too!"

of more radical or avant-garde modernist movements such as for example surrealism and dadaism (Hennoste 2016: 423–424). In art, a more significant turn towards modernism (including its more avant-garde movements) took place in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when postmodern ideas, pop art, conceptual art, action art (especially happenings) started to gain ground (Helme 2016: 29, 32).

In literature, it is possible to speak of a paradigm shift occurring only at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, when a leap towards postmodernism and a much more diverse and radical modernism took place (Hennoste 2012: 223–224). Intertextuality and language games gained an important position in both poetry and prose (Velsker 2001: 626; Annus 2001: 646). The academic activities of the Estonian Institute of Humanities (*Eesti Humanitaarinstituut*), a newly created private liberal arts college, also played a crucial part in poststructuralist thought taking root in the country. Already since the late 1980s, introductions to this new philosophy and translations of its key texts started to appear in press. The book series *Avatud Eesti Raamat* (Open Estonia Book), launched by the *Avatud Eesti Fond* (Open Estonia Foundation) funded by George Soros, influenced the Estonian cultural landscape by introducing new key texts of philosophy into Estonia (e.g. Jacques Derrida, Deleuze, Richard Rorty, Slavoj Žižek). Several writers, groups and magazines emerged that defined themselves as experimental. Although the Tartu-Moscow School of Semiotics had been active already since the 1960s, semiotics achieved wider popularity in Estonia only in the 1990s, and then especially in arts and art studies (Sarapik 2001; Linnap 2001: 79). Nevertheless, also several Estonian experimental writers (e.g. Mikita, Hasso Krull, Berk Vaher, Aare Pilv, Erkki Luuk, andreas w, and Kiwa) studied semiotic theory closely. At around the same time, in 1992, the Estonian Centre for Contemporary Art – also funded by the Soros Foundation – started to help to integrate Estonian art into the international field of contemporary art. It can be suggested that starting from the beginning of the 1990s, the mainstream of Estonian art has been what Hal Foster (1996) would call avant-garde.

Several experimentally-minded writers, artists, groupings, journals, galleries and festivals emerged at the end of 1990s and the beginning of 2000s in Tartu. A major proportion of the work originating from this active experimental scene plays with language and is inspired by poststructuralist theories (Vabar 2025). To a degree, Mikita participated in this scene. All in all, however, he rather remained a creative recluse. Mikita initially graduated from the University of Tartu with a degree in biology, yet went on to obtain his master's and doctoral degrees at the Department of Semiotics. In an interview, Mikita said that his first book, *The Joy of Mishap* (2000), consisted of leftovers of the material not suitable for academic work, although for him both academic and literary writing take their inspiration

from the same source (Mikita, Vabar 2002: 758). *The Joy of Mishap* included many formulas and matrixes (and a few of their applications) on how to create literature and other art forms in unprecedented ways. Erkki Luuk (2001: 98) said that this book could be “regarded as the model of permanent innovation – like a computer program you could constantly feed with new data” – and called Mikita’s next book *Rännak impampluule riiki* (“A journey to the kingdom of hocus-pocus poetry” 2001) an “experimentalistics of format” (“*formaadi-eksp*”, Luuk 2022: 65). The second collection is rather similar to the first one, both books being in part very funny, and they gave Mikita the status of a cult author in humanities circles interested in experimental literature.

Reviews for *The Joy of Mishap* and *A Journey* highlighted the fundamental importance the works attached to language and the signifier. Poet and philosopher Hasso Krull reviewed *A Journey* using Gérard Genette’s concept of ‘architext’. According to Krull (2002: 87), it is possible to “articulate the central device of Mikita’s poetry in the following manner: *Mikita has turned the architext into the intertext*, he uses recognition-based textual mechanisms not in order to draw readers’ attention away from them and on to something else, but to draw attention to those mechanisms themselves”. Another literary scholar and fellow experimental writer Aare Pilv compared Mikita’s first two books to Jorge Luis Borges’ library of Babel, which is “‘total’ – perfect, complete and whole – and [...] its bookshelves contain all possible combinations of the twenty-two orthographic symbols [...] – that is, all that is able to be expressed, in every language” (Borges 2000: 69); and to the search of a speculative-mythological language preceding the confusion of tongues at Babel, which would “contain all the possible significations in all languages of the world” or even “the potential linguisticity of all things in the world” (Pilv 2006: 158). According to Pilv, in the world of Mikita’s books everything turns into language. Pilv (2006: 160) thinks that it is possible

to say, a bit frivolously, that in the world of Mikita’s approach to language, the poet cannot have the problem of lacking linguistic means to express something; rather, the poet can run up against the problem at which point to stop phenomena becoming linguistic so as to leave something on the side of the signified.

Mikita himself had expressed the same thought even more clearly in his doctoral thesis:

A creative person sees in each object a creative solution; to this person, objects do not appear as separate individual things, but as significates [*signifikaadid*]. Each object can become a model, each action a method, each fact can become a ground for a hypothesis. Here it would be possible to distinguish between the *mimetic*

and the *modelling* perspectives on the surrounding world. The mimetic mode of description belongs to Aristotelian aesthetics and is characterized by a perspective according to which there exists a certain extratextual reality that results (for example) in an artistic text when reflected. The modelling perspective, on the contrary, presupposes that the extratextual reality itself is largely a product of texts. Text does not describe, but creates the world. The latter approach is characteristic of the Tartu-Moscow School of Semiotics. (Mikita 2000a: 79–80, original emphasis)

Thus, it is the perspective that replaces extratextual reality with an endless field of texts referring reciprocally to one another and to nothing else than texts, that is characteristic of the creative person. Mikita's thesis shares this perspective. Yet it is important to note that Mikita was not necessarily happy with such an ontological organization of things: "Sometimes it feels as if the world where we live is under an immense pressure from signs. Perhaps the world is too significational, too semiotic" (Mikita, Vabar 2002: 760). However, Mikita expressed strong doubts about whether it is possible to escape the pressure of signs:

Of course, throughout the ages people have sought the philosopher's stone to find a road that would lead to knowledge without the help of signs: without the use of languages, words, signs, all the semiotic rubble that we often do not actually like and that makes us feel as if this kind of mediated existence is fake to its core. Well, I would like to hope that this sort of philosopher's stone is out there somewhere. (Smiles.) (Mikita, Vabar 2002: 760)

### ***The Linguistic Forest: wide popularity and confused academics***

At the beginning of the 2000s, Mikita worked in marketing and published a peculiar marketing textbook *Kirsiõieturundus: Visioon alternatiivsest turundusest* ("Cherry blossom marketing: A vision of alternative marketing") whose reception was unremarkable. After the textbook, Mikita published a trilogy comprising *Metsik lingvistika* ("Wild Linguistics", 2008), *Lingvistiline mets* ("The linguistic forest", 2013) and *Lindvistika, ehk metsa see lingvistika* ("Birdistics, or Off to the woods with linguistics", 2015). These books employ various scientific disciplines to discuss human psychoneurological perception, language and its relation to the world, folkloristics, mythology, mycology, Estonian history, geology, geography, etc., but they do this in a popular scientific and essayistic style, sometimes engaging in quite dizzying and imaginative speculations. In these books, Mikita also presents personal memories of his family, of growing up in the countryside, descriptions of synaesthetic experiences, and the like. *Wild Linguistics* resumed the

arguments that Mikita had developed in his doctoral thesis and at the end of *The Joy of Mishap*. It sketches possibilities for engendering a natural language and a writing system that would differ radically from those currently in use. Still, in *Wild Linguistics* Mikita (2008: 13) stresses more strongly than before that

humans have an urge to get out of language and reach a different kind of language; often, the primal linguistic experience of human beings does not fit into the confines of language. [...] It seems that human beings have never fully come to terms with the idea that the world is semiotic or significant [*märgiline*]. This idea is distressing.

Thematically, *Wild Linguistics* covers similar ground to Mikita's earlier books. This is probably why its reception developed along a similar trajectory as well: there was a small number of laudatory reviews from critics who already thought highly of the author, and some of whom were experimental writers themselves. Yet things turned out differently for *The Linguistic Forest*. Although it continued discussing the themes of *Wild Linguistics*, its focus was even more on specific Estonian landscapes – especially the forest – and their effect on the worldview of both ancient and contemporary Estonians. In *The Linguistic Forest*, Mikita quite enthusiastically constructs national myths for Estonia whose defining myths had emerged in the 19th century and been influenced by romanticism. The myths had served as a focal point in transforming Estonian speakers into a nation and had helped the people to resist both the Baltic German overlords and the state authorities of Czarist Russia; they had helped to create the Estonian state at the beginning of the 20th century and to withstand Soviet occupation from 1940 to 1991. Yet in a postmodern, post-nation-state world, these myths no longer functioned quite so well. In the 1990s and 2000s there was much talk about the crisis of national identity; intellectuals started to express the need for new national myths. Mikita (2013: 100) proposed that

we have all somehow acquired a rather suspicious idea that truth is more important than myth. But deep inside we know nearly for certain that, in fact, myth is much more important. A person can live pretty well without knowing the truth, but if you rob them of their myth, life no longer has any meaning.

Mikita thus took the liberty of reinterpreting previous myths, for example those related to the national epic *Kalevipoeg*, in a playful and imaginative manner to construct new myths to give Estonians going through an identity crisis “positive visions and strength” (Mikita 2013: 152). The leading idea of Mikita's myths is that Estonians, a native people of the forest and nature, are characterized by “wild

thought”, “peripheral consciousness”, crazy ideas, peculiar creativity. According to Mikita, Estonians do not manage well with urban life and sober practicality.

Mikita’s project of myth construction was a brilliant success: *The Linguistic Forest* became one of the biggest literary phenomena in Estonia in the 2010s. It enjoyed incredible sales figures, enthusiastic reviews and media attention; Mikita became an in-demand performer at different cultural and popular events – and he remains one to this day. After *The Linguistic Forest*, Mikita published several books that broadly continue elaborating on its ideas. In his subsequent works, though, it is possible to notice an emerging pessimism and concern for the destruction of Estonian nature, especially in *Eesti looduse kannatuste aastad: Manifest Eesti metsale, kirja pandud iseenda jaoks 2018. aasta suvel ja sügisel, aga kardetavasti sai see natuke liiga sünge* (“Estonian nature’s years of suffering: A manifesto for the Estonian forest, written for myself during the summer and autumn of 2018, but I’m afraid it turned out a bit too dark”, 2018).<sup>5</sup>

However, there is a noticeable gap in the reception of Mikita’s work: it concerns academic reception. Even though Mikita became a cultural phenomenon, his works have not been the subject of any scholarly articles to date despite his popularity, dozens of reviews in press and the author’s own remarkable erudition. No bachelor’s or master’s theses on Mikita have been defended at the University of Tartu; Tallinn University lists a single master’s thesis (Mägi 2023) as well as a bachelor’s thesis (Känd 2016) whose scope, though, comes close to the level of a master’s thesis. In the latter, Maria-Helen Känd observes how former President Lennart Meri and Mikita construct the essence of being Estonian. To this end, Känd uses post- and decolonial theory, mostly relying on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s concept of ‘strategic essentialism’. However, the extremely thorough thesis is primarily concerned with the identity construction of Estonians as a nation and, consequently, such notions as synaesthesia, inner speech, and peripheral consciousness remain almost completely unobserved. Känd (2016: 30) calls Mikita’s trilogy a “self-help injection for Estonian readers in a humoristic key” that often resembles a conspiracy theory.

An even more telling example of scholars’ attitude towards *The Linguistic Forest* is a review published in the journal *Keel ja Kirjandus* (“Language and literature”) in 2014. Its author, linguist Ene Vainik says that Mikita “proceeds from a noble

<sup>5</sup> In English, Mikita’s literary works have only been published in the trilingual book *For-estonia. Estwald. Mine metsa!* (2019) and the bilingual avant-garde compilation *Olematute raamatute antoloogia/The Anthology of Non-Existent Books* (2014). *The Linguistic Forest* and a later book *Kukeseene kuulamise kunst* (“The art of listening to the chanterelle”, 2017) have been translated into Finnish as *Lingvistinen metsä* (2021) and *Kantarellin kuuntelun taito* (2018), respectively, and have met with success and popularity.

ideal: to create and establish a sustainable self-myth for Estonia focusing on its everyday extraordinariness”, yet also finds that he idealizes “the noble savage”, and represents a primordialist approach, in anthropological terms, which is why “the current book is, for me, an ideological overdose of Estonian exceptionality” (Vainik 2014: 145). Still, Vainik considers herself a soul mate of Mikita’s and agrees with several of his positions on Estonians’ identity, nature and the oversemiotization of contemporary culture, although reprimanding the book for its lack of references. According to her,

The book is a dance that literally makes the audience dizzy and might even cause nausea in the more sensitive readers: images, sounds, perceptions, theories, history, geology, cycling, *Kalevala*, synaesthesia and fungi – all of this spins around in a bottomless cognitive kaleidoscope. (Vainik 2014: 144)

Vainik thinks that “an attentive reader” might even have enough time to give Mikita a couple of psychiatric diagnoses: Ménière’s disease, dissociative disorder and a psychological state accompanied by “grand thoughts and altered states of consciousness” (Vainik 2014: 145); thus, the reviewer in principle expresses concerns about Mikita’s mental health. Yet at the same time, she “understands that the author has taken on the role of the shaman dancing in a frenzied semiotic trance, attempting to mediate visionary messages to the reader” (Vainik 2014: 145). In short, for an academic scholar, Mikita is enthusiastically constructing the characteristics of being Estonian, which, of course, may be nice, but appears as slightly over-the-top at the same time. Secondly, Mikita’s synaesthetic searches for inner speech and peripheral consciousness seem to be too far out there to be taken seriously; they can be regarded as self-help moves, a conspiracy theory, or even as symptoms of a psychiatric case.

### **Mikita and the material turn**

On the surface, *Wild Linguistics* (2008) continues with Mikita’s earlier favourite themes such as language and writing, but on closer inspection it appears that a shift has taken place in the ontological relations between language and world. In Mikita’s previous work, extratextual reality was fundamentally out of reach, as we saw above; in 2008, he no longer thinks in quite the same way. In *Wild Linguistics*, Mikita distinguishes between the natural language of pre-writing hunters-gatherers and the writing that emerged in agrarian societies. In pre-writing cultures, the role of language was

[...] different: language was used to sustain a balance between the human being and the world. Language was a tool for magical thinking. Over time, writing transformed language into a mere instrument of communication, into an attribute of power. [...] The kind of linguistic perception propagated by writing brought about a radical change: loss of the magic word undid humans' *communion* and replaced it with *interpretation*. The human being feels good in a place where everything has its correct meaning. (Mikita 2008: 11, original emphasis)

Thus, there exists a language exhibiting a certain relation to "the world" and "things" with which it is possible to attain "communion", but as a result of the spread of writing, communion as a "less semiotized experience" moves into the periphery (Mikita 2008: 12) and is replaced by "interpretation" or, in other words, by a semiotized perception of the world. Hunters and gatherers had no writing in a sense similar to that of the agrarian societies of the Middle East, but Mikita (2008: 103) says that they used symbols and landmarks understandable as sign systems closely connected to their surrounding physical space and landscape. Symbols of this kind did not designate words, but "cognitive realities of a wholly different sort. [...] This writing is like a map of the universe" (Mikita 2008: 104). In short, "humans did not strive to find the correct meaning of the word, but their place in the universe" (Mikita 2008: 108). He expresses a similar thought in *The Linguistic Forest*: "Our language and experience of language has crumbled to pieces over time, drifted far away from the body and from nature" (Mikita 2013: 207).

In Mikita's doctoral thesis, the capacity to perceive not objects but signifi-cates that allowed for free play was considered the fundamental characteristic of a creative person. In 2008, he takes almost the exact opposite position: the semiotized (significate-based) perception of cultures of writing that emerged in Middle Eastern cities is characterized by standardization and general translatability-interpretability, while communion, or object-based pre-writing perception of hunter-gatherers allows for more solitude and autonomy in its practices – that is, it enables more creativity. While it is true that already at the end of *The Joy of Mishap*, Mikita described in detail the "nature games" of various (and in part, fictitious) indigenous peoples, he then conceptualized them in a wholly different manner. In that work, nature games were not important for humans' communion with the world, with surrounding things and creatures, but for highlighting that "these peoples have cultural forms that support themselves on the natural environment in almost the same way as our writing is supported by the existence of paper" (Mikita 2000b: 151). Thus, the physical object in the nature games of *The Joy of Mishap* becomes a model or a signifycate in course of a process that is quite similar to those in cultures of writing.

To a certain degree, Mikita himself takes note of the shift or turn in his understanding of the relations between world and language. At the end of *The Linguistic Forest*, he describes strange perceptual experiences that he calls a “private culture” or “wild” experiences, which it is virtually impossible to convey in ordinary language. Mikita says that his original purpose was to create an entire new sign system for these experiences, a new writing.

However, as the texts [written in the new script] became more powerful in my imagination, the disturbing cognitive dissonance also grew correspondingly wider and wider. At one point it dawned on me that I am hampered by a strange fear of writing: if “wild” becomes a cultural sign, if it has already been put into writing, then it has found its end. From this moment onward, it is no longer wild, it is nothing but a piece among the realm of polished, cultivated art that I have been trying to outwit for so many years. In a sense, all writing is an epitaph, glorification of ruins – this is simply the essence of writing. Most sensible people accept the idea that there are fewer words in the world than there are things. (Mikita 2013: 224)

The ontological shift of *Wild Linguistics* described above makes it possible to regard Mikita’s later work from the perspective of the material turn and, in addition, to make sense of those aspects of his work that have so far remained obscure in the eyes of literary criticism. Postmodern and/or poststructuralist thought emerged from the linguistic turn that took place at the beginning of the 20th century. This turn resulted in a shift of focus from reality itself to languages and other sign systems used to describe reality. At around the turn of the millennium, another paradigm shift took place when humanities scholars and social scientists, but also artists and writers again turned their attention to the real, material, ontological, to the object or the so-called “thing-in-itself” (Schleusener 2021: 471; Foster 2020). This turn has given birth to a number of approaches, for example new materialism, speculative realism, actor-network theory, object-oriented ontology, thing theory or assemblage theory, which have been applied in various disciplines (Schleusener 2021: 471).

In Estonia, there has been talk of a cognitive turn (Õim 2008) and a performative turn (Kalljundi 2008) which took place considerably earlier, around the mid-20th century, and were likewise opposed to the excessive focus on language and texts in the humanities (Tamm 2008: 582). They can thus be considered precursors to the material turn that emerged later. Affect theory has gained some traction in Estonian humanities. Epp Annus (2013, 2015) and Raili Marling and Eret Talviste (2022) have observed Estonian literature from the perspective of affect theory, which they see as sharing similarities with the theories associated with the

material turn. *Uus Materjal* (*New Material*, from 2014), an art project in the form of a journal by master's students of the Estonian Academy of Arts, contributed to the spread of the concept 'new materialism' in the field of Estonian art (Nurk 2019: 38). Here it is worth mentioning that when 'materiality' has been addressed in Estonian art, the central focus has mainly been on material objects, conceptualized by various artists and critics in the gallery context (Nurk 2019; Teidearu 2019). A similar focus on material objects is characteristic of ethnological studies conducted in Estonia from the 2010s onward (Bardone *et al.* 2019). However, the material turn concerns the entirety of being, thus not only the surrounding material objects but also living beings who perceive them, and, in addition, the whole of physical environment where this reciprocal perception is taking place. Focusing only on objects neglects a significant portion of contemporary creative practices that are relevant for the material turn.

Sandra Mägi's master's thesis *Mets ja kehakogemus Valdur Mikita esseistikas* (*The Forest and Bodily Experience in Valdur Mikita's Essays*, 2023) discusses the body, matter, the "thing-in-itself" in Mikita's later work. Still, Mägi's theoretical springboard is phenomenology, that does ground itself in the person's bodily being-in-world, but does so from the perspective of the Cartesian *cogito*, striving to position itself transcendently in relation to the surrounding world. This goes counter to contemporary new materialism for which such a classic distinction between body and mind is something to be avoided. For Husserl, who represents classic phenomenology, the subject's relation to the world is characterized by intentionality: the subject must recognize the object and consciously define it as a knowable object. Objects that are not recognized simply remain outside of the subject's world (Roberts *et al.* 2022: 139). The phenomenological perspective explains the subject's rational and conscious relation to the world organized according to certain principles and included in human culture. The problem, however, is that Mikita's forest *is not* this type of a world. According to Mikita, the forest is defined by its non-belonging to human culture and by its non-organization according to certain rational principles.

### **Any-space-whatever**

Gilles Deleuze, who has significantly inspired thinkers and schools associated with the material turn (Schleusener 2021: 471–472), is a philosopher for whom it is possible to institute a relation to the world different from the one that phenomenology imagines. In fact, Deleuze (with Félix Guattari) makes a distinction between the world and the Earth: "The world is different from the Earth; one

might speak of the Earth in material, physical, historical terms as that which exists before and beyond conscious life, but the world is always a world *for* some being” (Colebrook 2019: 13). In Mikita’s works, the forest would belong to the Earth, not to the world. His forest is similar to what Deleuze called ‘any-space-whatever’ in his cinema books *Movement-Image* (2009[1983]) and *Time-Image* (2010[1985]). The conceptual frame of these books largely derives from Henri Bergson, especially his *Matter and Memory* (1991[1896]). According to Bergson, an individual’s everyday habitual functioning – that is, receiving and reacting to stimuli – is organized by the sensory-motor schema that grounds the way in which the individual’s perception is formed (Deleuze 2009: 64).<sup>6</sup> The sensory-motor schema enables individuals automatically to perceive their surrounding space – home, home street, store, car, bus, office, etc. – and the creatures, things and phenomena included in this space, and to act according to these: walk to the bus stop, to the store or something similar. Yet for some reason or another, the schema could fall apart: the individual no longer automatically recognizes surrounding objects or phenomena and thus cannot immediately proceed to action. Automatic recognition is then replaced by attentive recognition; the individual does not act, but observes and listens, affectively experiencing purely sensible optical and sound situations (Deleuze 2010: 44; Deleuze 2009: 109ff, 120). What Deleuze calls ‘any-space-whatever’ is an environment where the sensory-motor schema fails to function and where the person experiences optical and sound situations, while associating them affectively in an unorganized manner to his or her memories and imagination. The schema might fail because the individual has stepped into an extremely novel or unfamiliar environment, or because of a mental or psychic breakdown that causes the environment formerly perceived in an ordinary and automatic manner to transform into an any-space-whatever. Deleuze (2009: 109) stresses that any-space-whatever “is not an abstract universal, in all times, in all places. It is a perfectly singular space, which has merely lost its homogeneity, that is, the principle of its metric relations or the connection of its own parts, so that the linkages can be made in an infinite number of ways”. Since the concept is elaborated in his cinema books, Deleuze understandably illustrates it mainly with films, for example, Michelangelo Antonioni’s *L’Eclisse* (*Eclipse*, 1962), in which the protagonist steps into a stock exchange building and witnesses trading

<sup>6</sup> Strictly speaking, Bergson used the concept ‘sensory-motor system’ (*le système sensori-moteur*). In the field of child development Bergson’s concept was developed further by Jean Piaget who renamed it ‘sensory-motor schema’ (*un schéma sensori-moteur*). It is through the work of Piaget that the concept of sensory-motor schema is mostly known today. Deleuze uses Piaget’s term but does not refer to him and follows Bergson in his elaborations of the concept of sensory-motor schema.

activity which grows more and more exalted, and remains unintelligible for her. Nevertheless, the accompanying shouts and gestures flood over the character and shake her. Also, Antonioni's work is known for its use of empty landscapes – for example, the industrial wasteland in *Il deserto rosso* (*Red Desert*, 1964) and the desert motif in *Zabriskie Point* (1970) and *Professione: reporter* (*The Passenger*, 1975) – that constitute a particular type of any-spaces-whatever.

However, Deleuze conceived of 'any-space-whatever' not as a strictly cinematic concept, but as a phenomenon that characterized the material reality of his contemporary or near-historical Europe at the beginning of the 1980s. The concept also reflects an epistemological shift in post-Kantian philosophy:

Over several centuries, from the Greeks to Kant, a revolution took place in philosophy: the subordination of time to movement was reversed, time ceases to be the measurement of normal movement, it increasingly appears for itself and creates paradoxical movements. Time is out of joint: Hamlet's words signify that time is no longer subordinated to movement, but rather movement to time. It could be said that, in its own sphere, cinema has repeated the same experience, the same reversal, in more fast-moving circumstances. The movement-image of the so-called classical cinema gave way, in the post-war period, to a direct time-image. [...] Why is the Second World War taken as a break? The fact is that, in Europe, the post-war period has greatly increased the situations which we no longer know how to react to, in spaces which we no longer know how to describe. These were 'any spaces whatever', deserted but inhabited, disused warehouses, waste ground, cities in the course of demolition or reconstruction. And in these any-spaces-whatever a new race of characters was stirring, kind of mutant: they saw rather than acted, they were seers. Hence Rossellini's great trilogy, *Europe 51*, *Stromboli*, *Germany Year 0*: a child in the destroyed city, a foreign woman on the island, a bourgeoisie woman who starts to 'see' what is around her. Situations could be extremes, or, on the contrary, those of everyday banality, or both at once: what tends to collapse, or at least to lose its position, is the sensory-motor schema which constituted the action-image of the old cinema. And thanks to this loosening of the sensory-motor linkage, it is time, 'a little time in the pure state'<sup>7</sup>, which rises up to the surface of the screen. (Deleuze 2010: xi)

## Body without organs

Perhaps the best way of explaining the concept 'any-space-whatever' and of releasing it from its strictly cinematic confines is to compare it to another, much more famous concept, namely the 'body without organs' which Deleuze borrowed from

<sup>7</sup> A reference to Marcel Proust's *Time Regained*, the seventh volume of his *In Search of Lost Time* (translated as "a fraction of Time in its pure essence" in Proust 1960: 217).

Antonin Artaud. Deleuze had the habit of developing new terminology in each of his major books instead of specifying and elaborating on the same set of concepts from one book to another. Nevertheless, Deleuze's way of thinking was incredibly consistent throughout his career, there were no fundamental shifts, breaks or turns. As such, the terminologies of different books are reciprocally homological and, with some *caveats*, they can be put into correspondence – this has been done, for example, by Manuel DeLanda (2013: 197–219). 'Any-space-whatever' has been compared to the 'body without organs' before, and the Deleuze scholar Ian Buchanan (2006: 136) has even treated them as synonyms. It is necessary to be more precise, however: any-space-whatever is the physical environment of the body without organs. It is a space that helps one to become a body without organs, or a space that is specifically constructed for this purpose. To define the body without organs in the context of any-space-whatever, it can be said that the body without organs is an individual whose sensory-motor schema has fallen apart: "[T]he body without organs does not lack organs, it simply lacks the organism, that is, this particular organization of organs. The body without organs is thus defined by an *indeterminate organ*, whereas the organism is defined by *determinate organs*" (Deleuze 2004a[1981]: 41, original emphasis). Deleuze calls the body without organs an 'egg' defined by its intensive surface where it is possible to add organs and take them away again if one so wishes (Deleuze 2004a[1981]: 41–42; Deleuze, Guattari 2020[1980]: 149, 164).

Becoming a body without organs is, for Deleuze and Guattari, a commendable and productive practice. Its potentialities and dangers are introduced in a chapter of *A Thousand Plateaus*, entitled "How do you make yourself a body without organs?" (Deleuze, Guattari 2020[1980]). In the above examples derived from cinema, characters mostly come across any-spaces-whatever passively, due to the circumstances, involuntarily, yet it is clear that, for Deleuze, to dwell on and in these places results in emancipatory and productive experiences both on the individual and the social levels. He argues against Marxist film scholars who criticized Italian neorealist and French New Wave films where characters' sensory-motor schemas fall apart, because they understood both the films and the characters as "passive, negative, neurotic and marginal". According to Marxist critics, these characters, instead of improving the overall situation, replaced modifying action with "confused" vision (Deleuze 2010: 18–19). Deleuze, however, finds that the weakness of sensory-motor links makes it possible to unleash immense forces capable of bringing about the disintegration of established structures. For instance, a character in Jacques Rivette's film *Pont du Nord* (1981) "has all the characteristics of an unforeseeable mutant": she has the capacity to recognize in the street the members of a secret organization that wants to enslave the world; this type of

character becomes possible “because what happens to them does not belong to them and only half concerns them” (Deleuze 2010: 19). Thus, any-space-whatever cannot be understood as negative or unwanted surroundings; rather, it is a place giving birth to a new perception of the world, which is no longer constrained by the repressive sensory-motor schema.

It must be stressed, though, that body without organs and any-space-whatever are complementary only to a degree. The main purpose of the concept ‘body without organs’ is apparently to oppose any kind of organization. As such, the body without organs is an end in itself that cannot be taken any further, which Deleuze and Guattari truly do not in *A Thousand Plateaus*. The cinema-books, on the contrary, no longer oppose organization as such. Affective optical and sound situations perceived in any-space-whatever due to the breakdown of the sensory-motor schema are only starting points on which to build new ways of perceiving and reacting to the surroundings – ways with potentially very complex organization. Organization no longer proceeds from the sensory-motor schema, but from different foundations that involve, for example, the sedimentation of real and imaginary sheets of the past (as in Alain Resnais’s films); crystals of time forming around recollections (as in Federico Fellini’s films); various alternative presents (the work of Alain Robbe-Grillet); interweaving of the perspectives of characters, the actors that play them, spectators, the director (as in Jean-Luc Godard’s films); an indeterminate outside, which is outside any interiority of a mode of knowledge (as in Pier Paolo Pasolini and Carl Theodor Dreyer), etc. (Deleuze 2010: 116–125, 88–92, 131–134, 179–188, 174–179). Thus, the concept ‘body without organs’ enables us to exemplify and specify any-space-whatever only insofar as we take into account that becoming a body without organs is, in this context, not an end in itself; instead, it is a potential primary state from and on which it is possible to compose new organizations of the body unconstrained by the sensory-motor schema.

### **Mikita’s any-spaces-whatever**

Mikita says that it is extraordinarily simple for his sensory-motor schema to fall apart; he describes how this happens in the following way:

In an ordinary person, the body schema is rather static, and s/he has to put in a real effort of imagination to change it. For me, though, the body schema tended to displace all the time and in the more intensive moments it seemed as if my body was flowing like a river. It took me quite a long time to realize that not everybody experiences the world in this way. (Mikita 2013: 28)

Mikita makes a guess that the cause of his body schema dissolving might be some kind of a synaesthesia of movement that forces a person to mimic their surrounding objects.

If something catches the attention of such a person, then they simply *have to* mimic it, even if only a little bit. When I was a child, this perception was so strong that I felt my whole body swelling up like a ball because of external perceptions of movement. The only option was to go along with the rhythm – to jump, to leap, to run. Everything in the world seems to have its own specific trace of movement. It appears to me that a synaesthetic of this kind has difficulties stabilising their body schema which tends to fall apart constantly. This person is permanently accompanied by feelings of the body floating, swinging, riding, pulsating, growing and diminishing – there seem to be no real boundaries. It sort of feels like being a little bit drunk or dizzy. (Mikita 2013: 27–28)

Mikita has used the expression ‘a little bit drunk’ to describe other comparable occasions when he has sensed his body schema dissolve: observing tree rings on a stump, knots in the weatherboards of a building, the road network etched on a dry branch by a bark beetle or even the lines in one’s own palm (Mikita 2013: 18, 38, 231). In general, Mikita’s body schema tends to fall apart in the forest, where he has spent a lot of time since childhood – the forest is essentially a labyrinthine thicket of trunks, branches, stems, etc. For Mikita, the city is an unpleasant place mainly because it is dominated by straight lines and right angles; he would rather prefer the round constructions of pre-historic hunter-gatherers, or the curved and wavy architecture of Gaudi. However, today, culture and organization have already invaded the forest as well: “[I]n the beautiful mossy pine forests and in bogs with boardwalks, culture is already so deeply ingrained that true wanderers have learned to avoid those places” (Mikita 2013: 184). For this reason, it is easier to escape culture in the thicket, and what might look like feeble-minded behaviour to an outsider is in fact a road taken to become a body without organs in an any-space-whatever:

A person roaming around in the thicket, feet dirty and mind void of all thought, might have suited well for a prototype of feeble-mindedness in earlier times. But meanwhile the world has changed – now, the thicket has become a house of worship. Only in the thicket is it possible to put into practice one of the most important human rights – the right to give up everything. Soon, the thicket will be the only place in Estonia where you can escape culture, the world and perhaps yourself. (Mikita 2013: 183–184)

Mikita calls the consciousness that has escaped the shackles of the sensory-motor schema a 'peripheral consciousness.' The forest and thicket are not, however, the only potential any-space-whatever that can help one reach this consciousness. Other suitable places include, for example, the sauna, the bonfire and, under certain circumstances and with some *caveats*, also meditation (Mikita 2013: 59, 196, 203).

In Deleuze's cinema-books, any-space-whatever designated a zero-space where the individual perceives their sensory-motor schema disintegrating. Yet individuals potentially have the ability to perceive their surroundings and react to these according to other, different schemas. As mentioned above (see p. 87), these latter schemas are the subject of Deleuze's second volume on cinema. In an analogous manner, Mikita describes various systematic perceptual and behavioural practices that are not intelligible from the perspective of habitual cultural norms. Still, Mikita's practices are radically different from Deleuze's examples taken from (more or less avant-garde) films. This is understandable, since they involve different media: cinema vs. roaming alone in a landscape:

Since early childhood, I've been haunted by the need to touch things that I cannot physically touch: treetops, clouds, driving cars, etc. Quite often, I make a barely noticeable grabbing gesture as if I wanted to take hold of things I see far away. (Mikita 2013: 24)

I imagined how my one arm slowly stretches out, burrows itself under the sauna and comes back up on the other side, climbs up the back wall until it appears again on the ridge of the roof. The moment I imagined fingers appearing on the ridge was intoxicating. (Mikita 2013: 28)

He describes similar practices when having comparable feelings while riding a bike (Mikita 2013: 59), raking hay, chopping firewood and doing other prolonged and rhythmic physical activities (Mikita 2013: 222).

As a result of exercising these practices, the individual develops certain patterns and necessary sign systems made precisely for these practices. Mikita conceives these sign systems as inner speech. Partly proceeding from Lev Vygotsky, Mikita (2013: 46, 205) divides language into speech, writing and inner speech, the first two being suitable for communication between individuals, while the latter is a personal cognitive tool, which is why it is not easily communicable outside the individual. Mikita describes personal experiences and practices developed in inner speech (for example, "reading" trees as musical notation for singing in a certain manner). He is, however, convinced that a large number of people are actually synaesthetic and thus capable of such experiences that can develop peripheral consciousness (Mikita 2013: 24, 47), but since they do not master their inner

speech, they have not learned to recognize, fix, develop and nuance these experiences. Just as Deleuze regarded searching for any-spaces-whatever as a necessary and emancipating activity, Mikita in turn thinks that developing peripheral consciousness in a natural environment is highly relevant politically. Mikita finds that contemporary culture – which relies disproportionately on speech and writing, that is, communication – makes society increasingly standardized and oppressive, alienates one from one's physical environment and has resulted in a serious expansion of mental health problems. For him, there is too much culture understood in its habitual narrow definition – films, books, music –, which people do not really need in such huge quantities. Instead, Mikita stresses the need to develop personal culture based on inner speech, which is grounded in a direct contact between the person and their material reality. Personal culture deepens innovation and individuality and teaches the individual how to cope with mental problems.

Contemporary society teaches the human being to adapt to the world but does not know how to teach adaption to the self. [...] When the magic word [that is, the skill to master one's inner speech, S. V.] disappeared, the planet was gradually filled with sad people; with the increase in standards of living, these people became sad and obese. The figure of the contemporary human is a dispirited stout atheist who is constantly confused and who thus hates his fellow humans. It is remarkable that humans have not found a replacement for the magic word. (Mikita 2008: 41–42)

## The semiotics of Mikita and Deleuze

Mikita (2008: 13) writes that “humans have an urge to escape language and reach a different kind of language; the linguistic primal experience of human beings often does not fit into the confines of language”. But which urge do humans actually have: escape language or reach a different kind of language? And how can it be that linguistic experience does not fit into the confines of language? Although this quote is from the “post-material-turn” Mikita who no longer cares only about language games, but rather about things, physical environments, the world, this doubly oxymoronic sentence potentially contains two contrary semiotics, one of which is still purely centred on language.

Mikita is a disciple of the Tartu–Moscow School and has repeatedly expressed his admiration for Juri Lotman (Mikita 2021: 1162–1164; Mikita, Kull 2023: 151). The semiotics of the Tartu–Moscow School proceeds from Saussurean structuralism that, for the linguistic turn, was a central way of thinking: studies focused on signifiers and signifieds that come together to form an ideal system standing apart from material objects. When one strives to reach beyond language and closer to

things, then according to structuralist semiotics it is necessary to exit language – but this is impossible for human perception. Deleuzian semiotics proceeds from a wholly different ontology according to which all being is univocal and things are fundamentally inseparable from words. In “The geology of morals”, a chapter of *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari (2020[1980]) say, based on Louis Hjelmslev, that all material entities – organic and inorganic alike – have a content plane and an expression plane: the physical body and its power to emit signs. Inorganic objects have their external form as the expression plane, which encounters other objects. Organic beings have, in addition, the genetic code. The third, human expression plane – for example, speech and writing – has the power to cut itself off from the content plane or the body (Deleuze, Guattari 2020[1980]: 57–61). Yet no bodies can consist of merely a content plane, without simultaneously forming at least a potential expression plane for the surrounding bodies: bodies necessarily emit signs.<sup>8</sup> When the individual enters a situation in which they are surrounded by language or signs that appear to stand apart from bodies and if this situation seems wrong to the individual, then, according to Deleuzian semiotics, they should simply focus on the signs that are closer to bodies and matter.

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<sup>8</sup> Although Deleuze is customarily considered to be a thinker whose work is exceptionally consistent in its main motifs, there are important shifts in how he speaks of the genesis of meaning. In an early book, *The Logic of Sense*, that was first published in 1969 and is perhaps the most semiotic work among his oeuvre, the plane of consistency (termed ‘the transcendental field’) that generates sense or meaning emerges on the ‘metaphysical surface’ of material things, while ‘depth’ is where things, bodies and other physical phenomena influence one another reciprocally, but without sense (Deleuze 1990[1969]: 125–126). It is difficult to accommodate this perspective with the aforementioned Hjelmslevian one. In *The Logic of Sense*, Deleuze (1990: 188–189) first introduces the concept ‘body without organs’ that here belongs entirely to the world of senseless bodies and things. A few years later, when Deleuze starts writing *Anti-Oedipus* (1983[1972]) together with Guattari, his views change. In *Anti-Oedipus*, the authors plunge the plane of consistency into the depths of matter and now sense emerges from the depth (Smith 2006). In this way, the plane of consistency that generates meanings and the body without organs merge with each other: the latter becomes the “*plane of consistency* specific to desire” (Deleuze, Guattari 2020: 154, original emphasis). As a result of this shift, things and bodies can no longer be seen as senseless phenomena that do not emit meanings in any form. In fact, it has now become irrelevant to distinguish between surface and depth altogether. This is why Deleuze said in 1973: “I’ve undergone a change. The surface–depth opposition no longer concerns me. What interests me now is the relationships between a full body, a body without organs, and flows that migrate” (Deleuze 2004b: 261). In the present article, ‘the body without organs’ is understood in the sense of later Deleuze.

Which semiotics does Mikita proceed from? It is not possible to give a straightforward answer.

Already Wittgenstein believed that contemporary culture is essentially humans' fight against language, the urge to escape language, which will, however, never succeed in a radical way. It seems that human beings have never fully come to terms with the idea that the world is semiotic or significant [*märgiline*]. This idea is distressing. (Mikita 2008: 13)

This quote (and it is possible to find many like this in Mikita) seems to invoke the structuralist perspective on the relation between language and world, according to which 'out of language' means 'into the world'. For Deleuze, however, getting out of language would also mean exiting the world, getting out of matter.

Mikita's relationship to disciplinary semiotics would demand an article of its own, but hypothetically it can be said that most of the time Mikita is not striving to get out of language, as it were, but towards a different kind of language. His expression 'out of language' can be interpreted as an endeavour to exit conventional written language and other sign systems that are too far removed from matter and affective perception in the physical environment. Understood in this way, Mikita's semiotics is compatible with Deleuze's. While Mikita (2013: 224) thinks that "there are fewer words in the world than there are things", other kinds of signs still seem to be far in excess of things. Things, animals, phenomena and haecceities have a necessary agency that the human being must enter into a relation with, *volens volens*.

Since the end of 1990s, the semiotics department of the University of Tartu has become an important international centre of bio- and ecosemiotics. Compared to the Tartu-Moscow School, research conducted in these fields has a slightly different starting point and can be considered to reflect the material turn in semiotics, for example, by turning attention from Saussurean structuralism to the works of Charles S. Peirce whose semiotic system always entailed a material component, and who has also inspired Deleuze's cinema books. Mikita has participated in the ecosemiotic endeavours undertaken in Tartu ever since they started in the 1990s, making presentations at seminars and conferences. His works and talks often reference authors relevant for ecosemiotics, such as David Abram (Mikita 2015: 130), Bruno Latour (Mikita 2015: 74) or Kalevi Kull (Mikita, Vabar 2002: 758). Mikita (2015: 23) has also jokingly remarked that Deleuze and Guattari's concept of 'rhizome' as the functioning principle of culture might well have been inspired by research conducted at the Estonian Folklore Archives.

In parallel to the enthusiastic reception of Mikita's works by the general public in Estonia, world semiotics as well as neighbouring humanities' disciplines have

turned their attention to the network of life in the forest as a semiotic network – see for example Eduardo Kohn’s *How Forests Think: Towards an Anthropology Beyond the Human* (2013), which was published in the same year as *The Linguistic Forest*. Similarly to Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizome, Timo Maran (2019) has suggested the forest as a universal semiotic model that can be applied to any communicative collaboration, whether in human culture, living organisms, or in all kinds of ecosystems. The forest as a universal semiotic model would serve as an alternative to habitual anthropocentric models stemming from linguistics, philosophy, literary criticism, etc.

### Tying up loose ends

Valdur Mikita’s work is very idiosyncratic and has garnered a lot of warm reception in Estonia. However, no scholar has yet positioned Mikita in a wider context of the humanities and the social and cultural field. An interest in any-spaces-whatsoever was characteristic of the wave of experimental creation of the transition-period Tartu; the network ‘eksp’ started out with deconstructivist language games and urbanistic happenings in the mid-2000s. At the end of the 2000s, Erkki Luuk, c: and Martiini from the ‘eksp’ grouping began searching for any-spaces-whatever in Tartu and its surroundings, as well as creating any-spaces-whatever in their texts and art (Vabar 2025). Compared to Mikita, the ‘eksp’ network’s activities have encountered an almost opposite reception: their earlier, deconstructive actions garnered favourable opinions in the artistic circles, but their any-spaces-whatever-focused project *Tammeöö* (“Oak night”) which involved several exhibitions and performances in 2009–2010, and a book of the same title published in 2012 were met with almost complete silence; in 2011, ‘eksp’ ceased to function actively (Vabar 2025). Yet it cannot be said that their activities had had no effect or influence whatsoever: if not exactly a role model, the network was at least a precursor to various events and practices that became popular in Estonia in the 2010s. These practices consisted in searching for any-spaces-whatever in both urban and rural environments; they were undertaken in the context of urban and street art festivals, artist residencies, and also embraced by several individual artists, photographers and writers who are much better known in today’s Estonia than ‘eksp’ with its search for any-spaces-whatever.

Mikita appears to oppose all culture in its ordinary sense (books, films, music, etc.) when he suggests that Estonians should focus on developing their inner speech while spending time in the forest. It is possible to find parallels to the practices he describes in global tendencies: for example, in the 1980s California,

an experimental art group called the Cacophony Society<sup>9</sup> emerged. Some of its members later established the Burning Man festival and one member, Chuck Palahniuk, drew inspiration from its activities for his novel *Fight Club* (1996). The Cacophony Society's practices included explorations of abandoned and hard-to-access urban sites. From the 1990s onwards, urban exploration spread all over the world, including Estonia and the rest of Eastern Europe where an abundance of abandoned industrial and military districts was waiting to be explored after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Urban exploration focuses on "situations which we no longer know how to react to, in spaces which we no longer know how to describe" (Deleuze 2010: xi); thus it can be said that the search for any-spaces-whatever plays a crucial part in urban exploration. Another parallel can be found in the work of English writer J. G. Ballard (1930–2009). A recurring motif in Ballard's works is the collapse of the sensory-motor schema in any-spaces-whatever (the deteriorating and rotting environment of late-capitalist Western life, industry, science, space research) and becoming a body without organs.

There is ample reason to study Mikita's work from many different viewpoints, such as national myth-creation and identity construction, but also climate crisis, semiotics and why not also neurology, etc. It seems to me that none of these possible perspectives can escape 'the real' in Mikita's works: bodies, things, the material environment. To return to the material turn, it should be kept in mind that the concepts of 'material' or – and this is even more difficult – 'real' are construed very differently by different authors, schools and approaches. In his 1996 book *The Return of the Real*, Hal Foster understood the real in the sense of Roland Barthes's *punctum* and Jacques Lacan's *réel*: reality as a traumatic effect that resists all attempts of symbolization. He opposed this 'real' to the endless self-reference of signifiers in poststructuralism and -modernism. Yet writing in 2020, Foster, referring to Bruno Latour, notices a new way of framing reality emerging around the mid-2000s. In this new frame, the real object or situation is constructed in various ways, but not in order to question the real or to cancel it somehow as was done earlier in poststructuralism, but instead to sustain, support, highlight, examine, preserve the real: "Many artists have passed from a posture of deconstruction to one of reconstruction – that is, to the use of artifice to rehabilitate the documentary mode as an affective critical system, if not an adequate descriptive one" (Foster 2020: 154). Foster (2020: 154–155) says that using the documentary method it is possible to reconstruct, for example, criminal and catastrophic events that are kept from the public by the authorities. This method has also been used in fiction, for instance in Tom McCarthy's novel *Remainder* (2005). Its protagonist

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<sup>9</sup> I would like to thank Margus Tamm for making me acquainted with the Cacophony Society.

goes through a traumatic event: he is struck by an unknown object that fell from the sky. He sets out to relive and restage this event over and over again with the help of hired actors. It is important that for the protagonist the “repetition of the scenes is dedicated to realize them, not to simulate them, much less to derealize them” (Foster 2020: 156).

Mikita’s synaesthetic and peripheral experiences taking place in the forest are not, however, traumatic, but mostly enjoyable and mentally enriching; still, they are also mysterious and difficult to grasp with the habitual conceptual apparatuses operative in culture. They do not conform to the rules of what Byung-Chul Han has called ‘transparency society’, which entail rendering individuals and processes commensurable, mutually convertible and controllable: “Matters prove transparent, [...] when they are smoothed out and levelled, when they do not resist being integrated into smooth streams of capital, communication, and information” (Han 2015: 1). Transparency society makes people unhappy and indifferent, and this is perhaps the reason why Mikita’s peripheral experiences were received with such enthusiasm. Mikita approaches these experiences similarly to the above-mentioned documentarians or the protagonist of *Remainder*. He develops his inner speech, creates new signs, sign systems and languages if necessary: not in order to simulate experiences, but to realize them – to put it in Mikita’s own terms, not to interpret, but to commune (Mikita 2008: 11).

Not everything has a word for it, and thank god for this. [...] If we still inscribed the wild into writing, then it should be done in a way that would leave at least part of it uncaptured by the sign. And so I started to think that it is truly great wisdom to keep things *just a little bit* beyond the threshold of meaning, very close to it and almost touching it, but still on the other side. (Mikita 2013: 224)

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### **Valdur Mikita et le retour du réel : À la recherche des espaces quelconques dans les forêts estoniennes**

Au tournant du millénaire, un changement de paradigme s'est produit dans les arts et les sciences humaines occidentales. Le (post)structuralisme, qui s'était concentré sur le langage, le signifiant et l'épistémologique, a reculé, et son attention s'est alors tournée vers le réel, le matériel, l'ontologique, l'objet, ou encore ce qui est appelé la chose en soi. En Estonie, ce changement n'est devenu un sujet qu'au cours des années 2010, et principalement dans le cadre de l'art et de l'ethnologie, alors que, rétrospectivement, des changements dans cette direction peuvent être observés plus tôt et dans de nombreux autres domaines de la vie. L'œuvre de l'écrivain Valdur Mikita, qui a commencé à écrire dans les années 1990 et est soudainement devenu extrêmement populaire en Estonie en 2013, constitue un exemple caractéristique de ce changement de paradigme. Le passage des jeux de langage au réel se manifeste notamment dans l'intérêt de Mikita pour ce que Gilles Deleuze a appelé les espaces quelconques.

### **Valdur Mikita ja reaalsuse tagasitulek: metsas mistahes-ruume otsimas**

Umbes aastatuhandevahetuse paiku leidis Lääne kunstiilmas ja humanitaarias aset paradigmanihe. Senine poststrukturealistlik fookus, mis oli keskendunud keelele, tähistajale, epistemoloogilisele, taandus, ning tähelepanu pöördus reaalsele, materiaalsele, ontoloogilisele, objektile või n-ö asjale iseeneses. Eestis hakati sellest nihkest rääkima alles 2010. aastatel ning sedagi peamiselt kunsti ja etnoloogia kontekstis, ent tagantjärele võib täheldada sellesuunalisi muutusi juba varem ning märksa rohkemal elualadel. 1990. aastatel kirjutamist alustanud ning 2013 Eestis äkitselt ülipopulaarseks saanud kirjaniku Valdur Mikita looming on selle paradigmanihke iseloomulikuks näiteks. Pööret keelemängudest reaalsesse illustreerib Mikita huvi kandumine sinna, mida Gilles Deleuze on nimetanud mistahes-ruumideks.